DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 138 330 JC 770 262

AUTHOR Manikas, William T.
TITLE The Use of Small Groups in the American Government Classroom.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 17p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Government (Course); Community Colleges; Course Descriptions; Decision Making Skills; Discussion (Teaching Technique); *Discussion Groups; Divergent Thinking; *Group Discussion; Group Dynamics; *Information Utilization; Interaction; Interpersonal Competence; *Junior Colleges; Political Science; Problem Solving; Small Group Instruction; *Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS Brainstorming; Consensus

ABSTRACT

While the use of the lecture method of instructional delivery is recognized as important and valuable, teaching must be directed beyond mere content in order that students can develop other skills that transcend the boundaries of a given course. Small discussion groups in an American Government course, used as a supplement to lecture-based instruction, may be effective in facilitating development of students' oral communications, their ability to analyze and evaluate critically, their capacity to identify relationships between phenomena, and their ability to use people as legitimate sources of information. Discussion groups should be composed of the most diverse members of a class, rather than those who are most similar. The cohesiveness of each group is important to the efficiency of information-sharing; groups must remain intact throughout the course and should not exceed twelve members. Activities which have been found useful in the context of a class in American Government include "brainstorming" and "consensus-seeking". Through these exercises, group members gain appreciation for both the processes and substance of group decision-making and interaction and develop skills in interpersonal relationships. Techniques for building and utilizing information-sharing groups in the classroom, suggested group activities, and evaluation data for a course conducted by this method compared to a traditional lecture course are presented. (JDS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED138330

THE USE OF SMALL GROUPS IN THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT CLASSROOM

The lecture is perhaps one of the oldest methods employed by instructors working with groups of students. In any era of reform and reconsideration of teaching, traditional methods bear the brunt of sharp negative criticism. As a commonly used method, the lecture has had a negative image of long standing. Samuel Johnson, the famous writer and lexicographer once said in 1766:

> "People have now-a-days got a strange opinion that everything should be taught by lecture. Now, I cannot see that lectures can do so much good as reading the books from which the lectures are taken. I know nothing that can be best taught by lectures, except where experiments are to be shewn." (1904).

Following are some of the underlying justifications for using the lecture method:

1) Students are often happy when they are considered part of a large group made up of their friends and acquaintances. They want to have the same experiences as their classmates, and they want to share those experiences. They want to experience just what their fellows experience and they want to know just what their fellows know.
2) The lecture method, accommodates and encourages efficiency in gaining knowledge. Teaching by means of lecture is simply an efficient way of teaching a large number of students. This indeed has always been a matter of consideration for teachers. But today, when school enrollment is growing yearly, due to a combination of factors, the issue of efficiency is important. Efficiency must be considered in terms of time and cost (1962). It costs less to teach, via a lecture, a group of 100 students in a single room than it does to teach via some other method that involves small groups in many sessions in

JC 770 262

William T. Manikas
Social Science Dept.
Gaston College
Dallas, North Carolina 28034

in many rooms. There are certain experiences "that are too expensive to repeat for subgroups of the course" (1954).

3) The lecture method of teaching is consistent with the concept of the school as agent for transmission of knowledge to students. According to this view, teaching in school should concern itself with communicating to the student the skills, knowledge and values of his culture, so that he can employ these in his life. The student "is primarily engaged in an effort to learn the same basic subject matter...which the scientist had learned in his day...Most of the student's time should be taken up with appropriate expository learning" (1961).

4) The lecture method is viewed as being entirely consistent with and supportive of the anthropological concept of culture. That is to say, man can communicate the knowledge he has acquired to his offspring. A man's children can benefit from their father's learning provided he can relate it to them. This ability to transmit knowledge is one essential characteristic that sets man off from the lower animals. "...perhaps the most unique attribute of human culture...is precisely the fact that the accumulated discoveries of millennia can be transmitted to each succeeding generation in the course of childhood and youth, and need not be discovered anew by each generation. This miracle of culture is made possible only because it is so much less time-consuming to communicate and explain an idea meaningfully to others than to require them to re-discover it by themselves" (1963).

These are just some of the justifications for employing the lecture as a method of instruction. While it has been widely and commonly used, it is a

limited device for imparting knowledge and developing certain useful skills in the student. Thus, lecturing in American government courses should not be eliminated but should be supplemented with other teaching strategies.

The use of the lecture method carries with it the additional assumption that the overwhelming contribution of the course lies in its content. The content of American government, to be sure, is important but education involves more than the mastering of a particular body of knowledge. The student is no longer regarded as a passive agent but as an active participant in his own education.

We must proceed beyond content by providing an atmosphere in our classes where students can develop certain carry-over skills that transcend the narrow boundaries of American government or any other course. These skills include (1) effective oral communications; (2) the ability to analyze and evaluate critically; (3) the capacity to identify relationships between phenomena; and (4) the ability to use people as legitimate sources of information.

One way in which these skills may be developed is through the group-discussion method. In any type of group, decisions are made which are utilized primarily for the benefit of the group members. Individuals should be helped to come to terms with their needs for the achievement for power, controls, and with their feelings regarding authority. The group-as-a-whole is perceived as an instrumentality to help members experience the nature of making choices, of subordinating their wishes and desires for the greater good, and for transferring the new behavior to other situations. When a member has learned in one group how to cope with alternatives and what is involved in making decisions, he should be helped to transfer this learning to a similar situation either in the same or in a different group. Since group work is concerned with the utilization of the decision-making process for purposes of helping individual members achieve goals

for themselves, i.e., meeting their own needs as well as contributing to achieving the goals of the group, it follows that group work's interest in decision-making is related to its concern for the enhancement of social functioning of individual group members. Since social functioning means "the sum of the roles performed by a person", group work, as a method of social work, is concerned with helping individual group members enhance their role performances. Decision-making is inherent in any social role which a person is called upon to perform.

In order to create an environment in which these skills can be developed, it is necessary to restructure the traditional lecture-dominated American government classroom. Such traditional classes generally emphasize content over process. What skill-development does occur in this setting is generally limited to listening and note-taking skills. Perhaps, a cooperative, sharing atmosphere is at least as effective in meeting one's educational objectives as is a competitive atmosphere. A partially effective instructional technique I have used in an undergraduate American Government course involves the use of small, cooperative, information-sharing groups.

Resource groups within the American government classroom are not formed in a random or ad hoc fashion but, rather, according to a well defined set of principles grounded in empirical research (Thelen, 1967; Schmuck and Schmuck, 1971). First, groups should be built on the widest possible number of differences among group members rather than similarities, because people with widely divergent interests, values, and backgrounds will bring a variety of perspectives to the group. Second, since the efficiency of information-sharing groups is directly related to group cohesiveness and identity, it is imperative that groups remain intact for the duration of the class (quarter). And third, the optimal range in group size is between eight and twelve. If a group is expected to function in a task-oriented manner over a relatively long period of time, less than eight group

members will not provide a sufficient number of contrasting roles while more than twelve will cause role duplication.

The goal, then, of group-building in the classroom is to divide a large class into functioning resource groups based on the widest possible differences and in such a manner as to encourage group cohesiveness and identity. For purposes of illustrating the group formation process, let us assume that our class size is thirty-two students who will be divided into four groups of eight each. The process which requires approximately thirty minutes to complete, can be described as follows:

1. All participants are asked to provide answers on a 5 x 8 card to a series of questions designed to elicit data regarding their interests, values, backgrounds and experiences. The questions I used were: (1) "If you had to spend two years in Washington, D.C. would you choose to go as (a) a student, (b) as an elected official, or (c) as a secretary of a governmental official?" (2) Have you ever lived outside of Gaston County?" (3) Have you ever lived outside of North Carolina?" (4) Have you been active in one of the major political parties?" (5) Are you a registered Republican or Democrat?" (6) If you are a registered Democrat, have you voted for a Republican?" (7) What is your occupation?" (8) What is your major?"
2. Students are then instructed to fasten these 5 x 8 cards on their clothing in such a way as to be easily read by other students.
3. For the next six or seven minutes, all students are to circulate in a cocktail-party fashion, reading each other's responses but remaining absolutely silent.
4. At the end of this non-verbal phase, all participants are asked to select the person whose written responses are most unlike their own

and form a pair. They are asked to select a person with whom they are not familiar, if possible.

5. Each person is given approximately five minutes to collect personal information on his or her pair partner.
6. Each pair, after brief consultation, will select another pair to form a quartet. These quartets will move to a neutral location. Each member of the quartet will introduce his or her original partner using the personal data collected earlier.
7. After all personal information is exchanged, the quartet will caucus to determine which other quartet they would like to join. Invitations to join another quartet may be declined or accepted. If an invitation is declined, a quartet will invite another quartet until all quartets have been chosen.

Once sufficient time and effort has been taken to build efficient information-sharing groups, they are ready to begin dealing with the substance of American government. This group-building process will have produced a degree of group cohesiveness owing to (1) the exchange of personal information, (2) mutual decision-making, and (3) the group's acceptance of an invitation or having its invitation accepted.

Although there are a number of uses for small groups in the classroom (Clark and Ramsey, 1970; Hyman, 1970), I have used them in my own class in two essential ways: brainstorming and consensus seeking. Let us examine each of these uses in detail.

"Brainstorming and Information Processing." The purpose of a brainstorming session is to (a) generate a large number of ideas or solutions to problems in a nonevaluative manner, and (b) stimulate individual divergent thinking and creative problem-solving skills. Groups are given a question to answer or a problem to

solve, and group members in a spontaneous manner are to suggest possible answers and solutions.

Each group is to select a secretary who will record every idea generated by the group. During the brainstorming phase, there is to be no criticism, evaluation, or interpretation of the ideas generated by the group. Bizarre ideas are not discouraged, for they may serve to stimulate more meaningful ones for other group members. And during this brainstorming phase, the emphasis is on quantity of ideas generated.

A specific example of a brainstorming exercise for the American government class could be phrased as follows: "During the 20th Century the executive branch has assumed the more dominate role in the American government. Give the different ways in which Congress has surrendered its enormous authority and resources to the executive branch."

As the group members attempt to answer this question, each suggestion is recorded by the group secretary. During this phase there is no explanation why the suggestions were made and they are neither criticized nor interpreted. After approximately fifteen minutes of this free association phase, the ban on criticism, analysis and evaluation is lifted and group members are asked to identify reasons for making their suggestions.

One advantage of this particular exercise is that it is almost totally non-threatening because there are many suggestions to be made. To be sure, some suggestions will be better choices than others but it is possible to justify almost all the suggestions. Another advantage of this particular exercise is that it gives every member an opportunity to participate.

The brainstorming technique with small groups teaches students to respect and build upon their own and others' creative capacities and encourages the open and experimental mind so important for effective problem-solving. Moreover,

brainstorming substantially increases a student's active involvement in his or her own learning.

After the groups have had sufficient time to analyze the suggestions to answer the question, the instructor will ask all students to return to one large group. The recorders, serving as their group's spokesman, will take turns sharing with the whole class their best suggestions. It has been my experience that undergraduates are consistently more willing to participate in a large class discussion if they have had an opportunity beforehand to test out their ideas in their small groups. In other words, the relatively supportive and non-threatening nature of the small group environment frequently serves to encourage students to risk sharing their ideas in a large, less intimate environment.

"Seeking Consensus." Students in small groups can become involved in political science content by working on consensus exercises. The purpose of these consensus exercises is to demonstrate the efficacy of information-sharing groups by comparing the results of individual decision-making with the results of group decision-making. Such a demonstration can be made in examinations on American government content. Traditional one hour exams as a means of student evaluation are as applicable to the small groups technique as they are to the more traditional lecture-oriented classroom. On several occasions during a quarter, pencil and paper exams (composed of multiple choice items, true-false items and more subjective identification questions) are given to all students. During the class period immediately after the exam, students take the very same exam again but this time within their small groups. A class member's grade on the exam will be some type of average of the individual score and the group score. In my own classes, individual exams are worth 75% and group exams are worth 25%.

There are certain ground rules governing group examinations or other consensus-seeking exercises: (1) members should avoid arguing with one another in order to "win" as individuals; (2) conflicting answers and rationales should be viewed as helping rather than hindering the process of consensus; (3) the efficiency of the consensus exercise will be maximized if group members accept responsibility for both hearing and being heard, so that everyone in the group is indeed in the decision-making process; and (4) groups should avoid "conflict reducing" techniques such as majority vote, averaging or trading in order to reach consensus.

There are at least two benefits to be derived from this type of consensus exercise, one substantial and one procedural. First, in terms of the substance of American government, students become highly involved in the course content (i.e., test items) if for no other reason than to improve their grade. But in the process of determining the correct answers, a wide variety of reasons justifying the answers will emerge from the groups: as a result, all students will be exposed to both political science data as well as political science thought processes. The second benefit derived from this type of consensus exercise involves gaining an appreciation of the efficacy of group decision making. In the one experiment of using these group exams, every student's group score has been higher than the individual score. Thus, the student should leave this experience with the significant yet little understood insight that cooperating information-sharing groups, when functioning properly, can more efficiently solve problems and answer questions than can any of its members operating independently.

The incorporation to some degree of small groups into the American government classroom can be justified on several grounds. First, in terms of our roles as general educators in a liberal arts tradition, the increasing scale and complexity of social life today places a premium on relating well to others

and working effectively in groups. If some of the pressing social problems of the world are to be solved, young adults must learn to deal with interpersonal tensions and conflicts constructively and creatively. Thus, in addition to and concurrent with the teaching of political science content, we should be concerned with the development of skills of interpersonal relationships.

But in addition to our societal responsibility as general educators, I submit that the use of small groups can facilitate the learning of political science content and develop a positive attitude in students toward that course content for use in the future. The use of small groups in the American government class is valuable because it actively involves students in their own education. Knowledge is not a commodity that can be crammed into a student's head but is a psychic state, for as Harold Taylor (1969) reminds us:

> "Until the one who seeks it acts within his own consciousness and makes an idea or a fact or an experience part of his own psychic development, he has not gained knowledge."

The small groups that we have described are constructed in such a way as to produce cooperation, assistance, support, encouragement, respect, and constructive criticism--a social climate conducive to gradual risk-taking and academic success. It would seem reasonable to expect that a positive, supportive social climate would both enhance a student's self-esteem as well as increase the possibilities of personal and academic growth due to a greater willingness to take intellectual risks.

Moreover, if we assume some positive correlation between self-esteem and academic performance, the dispersion of influence characteristic of well-functioning small groups would seem to foster feelings of self-esteem and personal competence. That is, leadership functions and influence in small groups are so well distributed that all group members can feel power, competence, and self-worth in accomplishing tasks and working together.

REFERENCES

Ausubel, David P. "Learning by Discovery." Educational Leadership 20: 113-117, November 1962.

_____. "Learning by Discovery: Rationale and Mystique." Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals 45:18-50, December 1961.

_____. "Some Psychological and Educational Limitations of Learning by Discovery." New York State Mathematics Teachers Journal 13:90-108, June 1963.

Bernstein, Saul. Explorations in Group Work: Essays in Theory and Practice. Boston: Milford House Inc. 1973.

Boswell, James. The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D. Oxford ed., Vol. I. London: Henry Fronde, 1904.

Clark, B. M. and Ramsey, M. E. "Why Small Group Instruction?" Des Moines: Polk County Board of Education, 1970 (ERIC No. ED 183-234).

Hyman, Ronald T. Ways of Teaching. New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1970.

Loud, Oliver S. "Lecture and Discussion in General Education." Journal of General Education. 8:30-33, October 1954.

Schmuck, R. A. and Schmuck, P. A. Group Processes in the Classroom. New York: William C. Brown, 1971.

Taylor, H. Students Without Teachers. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969.

Thelen, H. A. Classroom Grouping for Teachability. New York: Wiley, 1967.

RESULTS OF SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS IN AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

I. Students' Comments (Experimental Class)

A. Group Tests

1) Like Dislike

18 0

2) Representative Comments

a) "Hepled to increase grade average but also stimulated the student to look up a correct answer-once missed and looking up the correct answer will more than likely last in the mind longer.
"Because the grade can be improved some of the failure attitude is removed and the student feels better about his attempt in the class."

b) "It gives you a chance to pull your grade up and also you find out 90-95% of the correct answers which you normally never pay an attention after a test."

c) "Gives a chance to review and raise grade-even if only a little."

B. Group Discussions

1) Like Dislike

16 2

2) Representative Comments

a) "Good, helps you to understand and clarify the material you're reading about."

b) "If you missed a point in your reading, someone in the group may bring it out."

c) "Appreciation for opinions of others. We learn by our peers.

II. Student Retention

A. Experimental Class

1) 71% retention rate
2) 6 out of 21 students dropped out for various reasons; including illness, change of job shifts and low grades.

B. Traditional Class

1) 67% retention rate
2) 6 out of 18 students dropped out for various reasons; including illness, job related reasons and low grades.

III. Grade Point Average on a 100 percentile basis

A. Experimental Class

Mean = 81.3%

B. Traditional Class

Mean = 78.5%

C. Significance of the difference

Using the statistical t-test to measure the significance of the difference between two means for independent samples, the null hypothesis is not rejected; that is the mean of the experimental class is the same as the mean of the traditional class.

IV. Difference Between the Pre- and Post-test of the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule

SCALE	EXPERIMENTAL	TRADITIONAL
A. Achievement: To do one's best. To be a recognized authority	+5.3%	-4.3%
B. Deference: To get suggestions from others. To find out what others think.	-10.9%	-8.5%
C. Autonomy: To be independent of others in making decisions. To avoid situations where one is expected to conform.	-4.3%	- .5%
D. Affiliation: To participate in friendly groups. To share things with others.	+1.6%	-3.3%
E. Dominance: To argue for one's point of view. To be a leader in a group. To make group decisions.	+6.8%	+5.7%
F. Nurturance: To help friends when they are in trouble.	+4.9%	+9%
G. Aggression: To attack contrary points of view. To criticize others publicly.	+2.2%	+4.7%

DISCUSSION OF EPPS RESULTS

The experimental class displayed a higher drive for achievement compared with the traditional class. Given the opportunity to be a recognized authority, students in the experimental class sought fewer opportunities to get suggestions from other students within the same group. The group discussion experience gave the students in the experimental class the opportunity to speak out more and to do one's best. While they relied less on others for suggestions in dealing with their study questions, they simaltaneously came up with answers that reflected the consensus of the group.

The experimental class reflected a greater desire to participate in group discussion than did the traditional class. This drive for participation in the experimental class conforms to their drive to be a recognized authority among their peers. The positive scores on the achievement and affiliation scales and the negative scores on the autonomy scale show that the students in the experimental class wish to be recognized by their peers for their achievement but are willing to make final group decisions on a consensus basis.

The traditional class scored better on the nurturance and aggression scales compared to the experimental class. Perhaps, this is due to the notion that in a group situation students wish to do their best and to argue for their own point of view but not at the expense of breaking up the group or creating enemies as indicated in the aggression and affiliation scales.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIF.
CLEARINGHOUSE FOR
JUNIOR COLLEGES